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Nobile on Ginzburg on Eros

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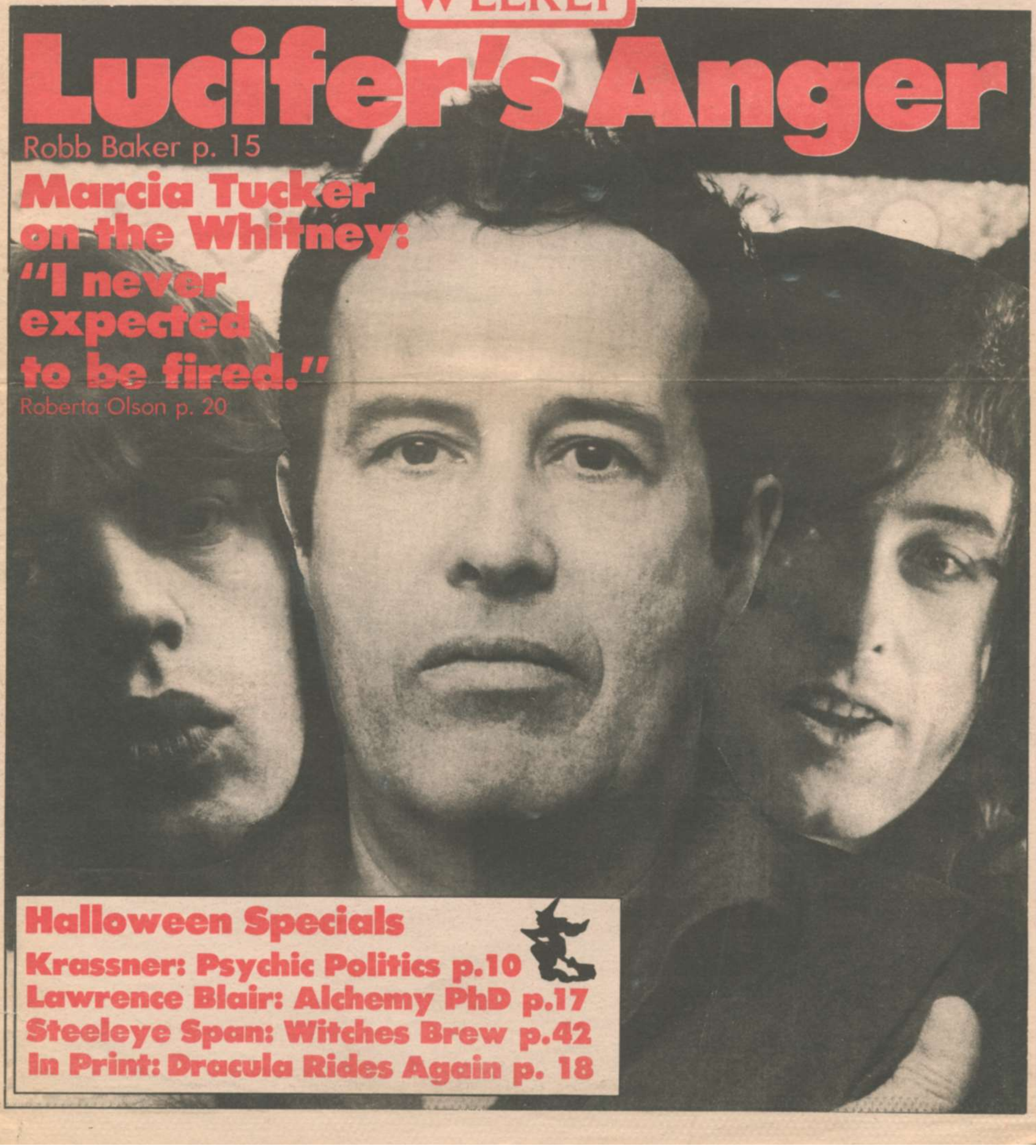

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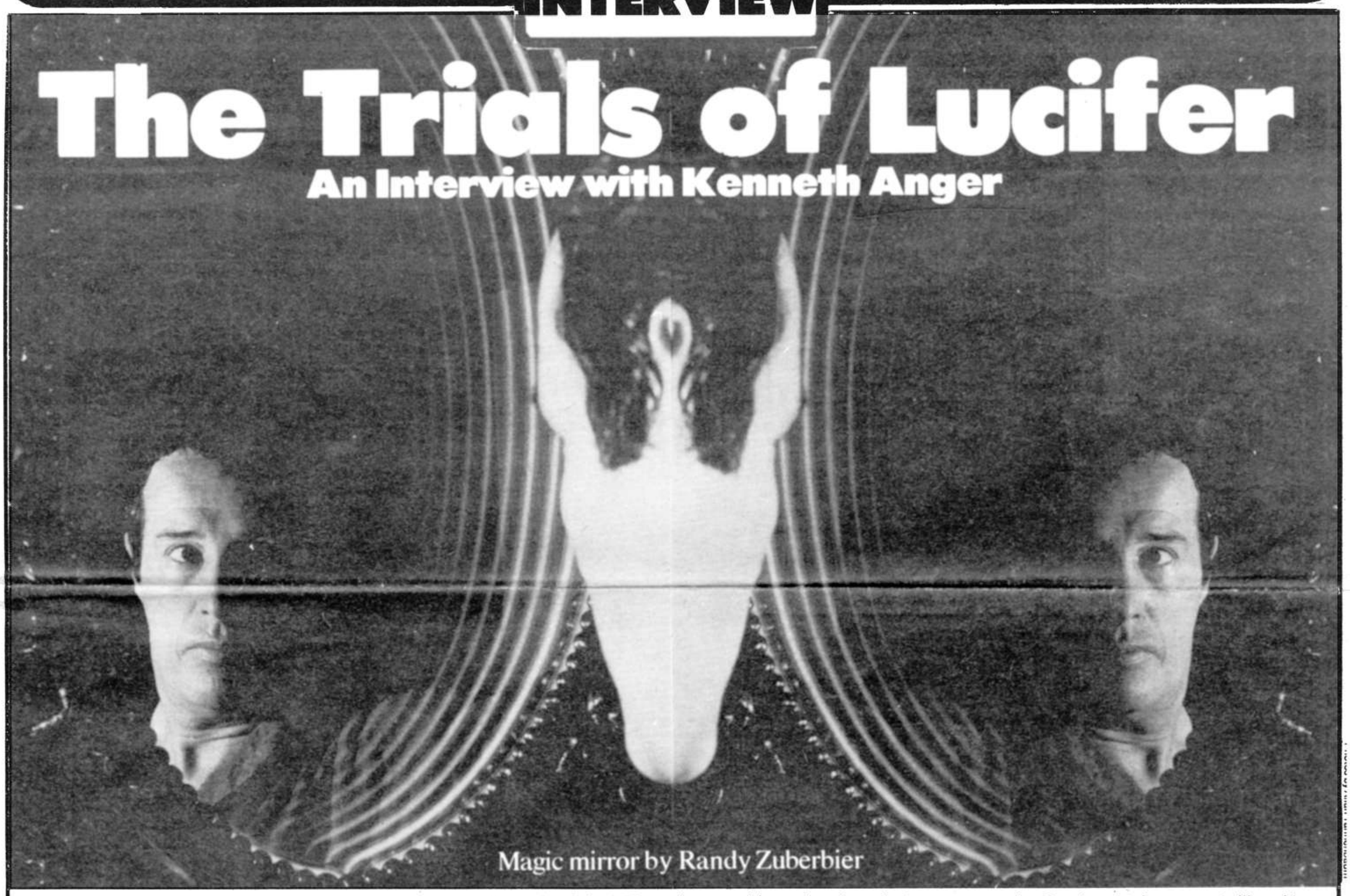
SOHO ARTS

INTERVIEW

The Trials of Lucifer

An Interview with Kenneth Anger



Magic mirror by Randy Zuberbier

Robb Baker

I.

Kenneth Anger is upset. The hot water faucet is busted and the sink is flooding and the superintendent is nowhere to be found. It's cleaning day and there's no floor wax and the maid doesn't speak any English and he doesn't speak any Spanish. His roommate, who is supposed to be here to help with such disasters, hasn't shown up. And the interviewer is knocking at the door asking personal questions about ritual magic and Anger's recent big blow-up with Jimmy Page in London in which he fired Page (in absentia) for not completing the score for his new movie, *Lucifer Rising*.

Kenneth Anger is a quiet man, courteous, shy. He keeps apologizing to the interviewer, who gets more and more tongue-tied as the afternoon wears on. Both of them bemoan the fact that the talk isn't going better, that some of the most important questions seem to get locked in silence. It's only later, in the replay, that the realization comes that things haven't gone so badly after all. And altogether there are two more sessions—one the day before when a freight man comes to deliver a life-sized painting of the Frankenstein monster, just in from sunny California, and another later the second night, with roommate and superintendent having been located, water faucet fixed (temporarily, at least), the maid and her vacuum cleaner gone, and a semblance of quiet restored.

The interviewer fumbles through notes, looks up hesitantly, tries to decide which is the real Kenneth Anger among the various pre-conceptions he has brought: the underground filmmaker whose works have chronicled motorcycle sex, S & M, psychedelics and Satanism? The sharp-tongued author of the movieland gossip classic, *Hollywood Babylon*? The serious occultist and student of ceremonial magic? The darkling nostalgia freak, collector of pop memorabilia, sheet music, autographs and rare first editions of kiddie literature? Or just the quiet guy in the apartment downstairs?

Like the subject/persona of his new film, Anger has gotten a lot of bad press, has been plagued with misconceptions and misinterpretations about what his work, his ideas, his life are really about. The same misconceptions cloud the memory of Aleister Crowley, the man whose magic religion Anger follows, and of Jack Parsons, a Crowley student who was Anger's personal link with the English magician. When you make magic and flaunt the Judeo-Christian hierarchic "order" that's a risk you take. Strange things start to happen. It's enough to make a person believe in conspiracy theories.

Take *Lucifer Rising* for example. Anger has been working on the film for ten years. His split with Page over the score is not the first problem he's had with completing the work—not by a long shot—but it's fairly indicative of the general complications involved. "Since the beginning of this year, the relationship with Page has deteriorated more and more," Anger relates. "Even though he gave me a room to work in in his house in London, and the use of the editing console that was used for the Led Zeppelin concert movie so that I could use the equipment to work on *Lucifer Rising*, he was never around, wouldn't return my calls. He had only completed 28 minutes of music for the film in over three years. I kept requesting more music and it never arrived. So finally I realized that there was something more important than music to him and that was the White Lady, which is a code name for the disaster in his life. I realized he would never finish the movie, at least under the present circumstances." After Page's girlfriend argued with Anger and kicked him out of the house, Anger sent word to Page's record company (still unable to reach him personally) that he was fired from the project.

Page's music for the first 28 minutes of the film (that heard in the work-in-progress version of the film which was shown in New York and abroad last year) is excellent, and Anger was pleased with it. But now that 28 minutes will also be junked. "There will a completely new score. The Page score is a piece of history."

Page and Anger met at a book auction at Sotheby's in London. Both were bidding on some rare editions of books by Aleister Crowley, and Page outbid Anger, which caused him considerable irritation.

Page, who owns one of Crowley's former homes, a house called Boleskine on the shore of Loch Ness in Scotland, has a certain reputation in the rock world for being "into the occult." Anger now questions the seriousness of that interest. "In retrospect, I'd have to say no, the interest is not that serious. He's interested in *collecting*, whatever that means, but he's proven to me that he doesn't have a serious interest in Crowley by the manner in which he's related to this situation. Also, he has everything in a bank vault. That's not a Crowleyian approach. He's not learning anything from the material by keeping it locked up in a bank vault."

Anger and Page had occasional conversations about Crowley and the occult, but "he was always extremely distracted by other things—to get him alone for a conversation was a major feat." They did communicate well, initially, about the music, and the result is the haunting score ("music that evokes the past without trying to imitate, say, Egyptian music, which we don't really know anything about anyway") for *Lucifer Rising Part I*.

But then Page's "problem" entered the picture, and Anger realized the situation was one he could not deal

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with artistically. "Everything just dried up. He's fallen into a trap that's an occupational hazard of the rock industry, I guess, but I think it's an utter disaster for anyone with a serious interest in the occult. I've never known it to be creative. It's always been a negative thing. And a lot of people have been involved with it, but they'd be better off if they hadn't been."

Later, after the super arrives to fix the faucet, Anger mentions, "I could have helped him. I helped Marianne Faithfull. But he wouldn't even return my calls."

II.

Kenneth Anger is a magician, a magic-maker, a magus. The interest in the occult has existed since very early childhood ("I think it grew out of my interest in fairy tales and books like *Arabian Nights*") and has been a marked influence, a symbolic underpinning, in all of his films (which he's been making—on professional, 16 mm equipment—since the age of 9).

But nowhere in Anger's canon has the influence of magic been more apparent than in *Lucifer Rising*, where it comprises the whole of the work. Filmed in various locations in Egypt, Germany and England which are sacred worship spots of ancient cultures (basically the Celtic, Druid, and Egyptian priesthoods), the work is charged with the magic energy of the places filmed. It vibrates with mystery and awe.

All of the sacred places are, in fact, sites of sun worship, and *Lucifer Rising* is itself directly connecting with the dawning of a new age, a new consciousness. Like the pyramid initiation rites of ancient Egypt, the film moves slowly up flights of stairs, to higher levels, towards the rising sun.

The new sun is Lucifer, the fallen angel, the rebellious beautiful favorite of God, the willful adversary who exiles himself into heretical "eternal darkness" but whose name means "bringer of light."

Judeo-Christian theology has made Lucifer the personification of evil, the Devil, Satan, but Anger says, "I see Lucifer as rising again to Heaven and a kind of reconciliation taking place, in an allegorical sense." He links Lucifer to other rebels in history and myth—"Prometheus—the Prodigal Son—Cain and Esau—even people like Rimbaud and Che Guevara."

Anger is an follower of Aleister Crowley's religion, Thelema, and the Lucifer figure exemplifies Crowley's philosophy of the rebel-savior who casts off all rules of the established order and lives by the difficult determination of his own will.

"The film is an affirmation of the primacy of nature," Anger says, in relation to the sacred places where it was filmed and the strong feelings he got from the places themselves "in spite of the tourists," adding "Ancient man was one with nature. That's been lost. It has to be found again. Lucifer is the angel of light, a sunbeam. He's also the patron saint of movies, the light behind the lens. Currently we're in a period of darkness, ignorance. Things go in cycles. They go up, they go down. It's part of the whole game of creation. Civilizations have their peak and they fall. Knowledge is painstakingly gathered together and dispersed, then it's lost again. It's just an endless cycle. What's found is lost and then it's found again.

Photos by Allan Tannenbaum

Anger unpacking two paintings by San Francisco artist DeMetrie Kabbaz (of Valentino and Frankenstein Monster)

"*Lucifer Rising* is a work of art, a metaphor. I would like it to be a sign of something new. It can be. Even though technically this is the beginning of the Age of Aquarius, it's just the opposite of the song from *Hair*. These are like the birth pangs of something totally new. It's going to be a very painful thing to encounter for quite a long time, well into the next century."

Yet the film is a work of hushed beauty, of quiet hope. Lucifer takes us beyond the pain, the violence that has dominated many of Anger's earlier works. "I hope so. Because I am optimistic, in the long run. And in this work, it's the light that's rising [*not a sign, as in his earlier work, "Scorpio Rising"*]—I'm almost describing the sunrise, and it's a spiritual sunrise. It's fashionable now for things to be sort of—well, there's an appalling amount of pessimism being pumped out in the name of fashion. We're living through an age of disillusionment, and we've got reason to be disillusioned, but I think one of the functions of art is to cause a change. If *Lucifer Rising* can change people at all, I hope it will be to find a ray of hope."

III.

Like Lucifer, Kenneth Anger is a rebel. Weaned on the glamorous gloss of the Hollywood mystique (his hometown was Santa Monica and his grandmother was once a big-studio wardrobe mistress), Anger challenged that illusionary world radically, making startlingly personal films of an iconoclastic nature (both in terms of technique and subject matter) from the time of early adolescence.

The first film (made when Anger was 9) was titled *Who's Been Rockin' My Dreamboat?* and juxtaposed a sound track including a similarly titled song by the Ink Spots with footage showing children playing war games—"Not cowboys and Indians, but more like the Japs invading California. That was back before the war, but kids could not help but be aware that there was a crisis brewing. It used several songs that were popular at that time. I already had this thing of using pop music as an ironic comment" (the technique employed so effectively in *Scorpio Rising* over 20 years later).

There was another early film "inspired by Buster Crabbe's Flash Gordon series" and a work called *Escape Episode*, filmed in Scottish baronial castle in Hollywood Hills owned by Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa. "It was the first film that had any kind of statement of what I was about—the story of a girl (she was played by Shirley Temple's stand-in) who lived in a crumbling mansion with her spiritualist aunt. She wanted to escape from that religiosity, that kind of hysterical Christianity. It was a reflection of my own desire to break away from my family."

Even in the earliest works, Anger never used dialog. One work (made when he was 10) was hand-tinted. Another dealt with incest, and still another (made when he was 13) depicted (according to one report) "sexually turned-on Hollywood crowds on V-J Day."

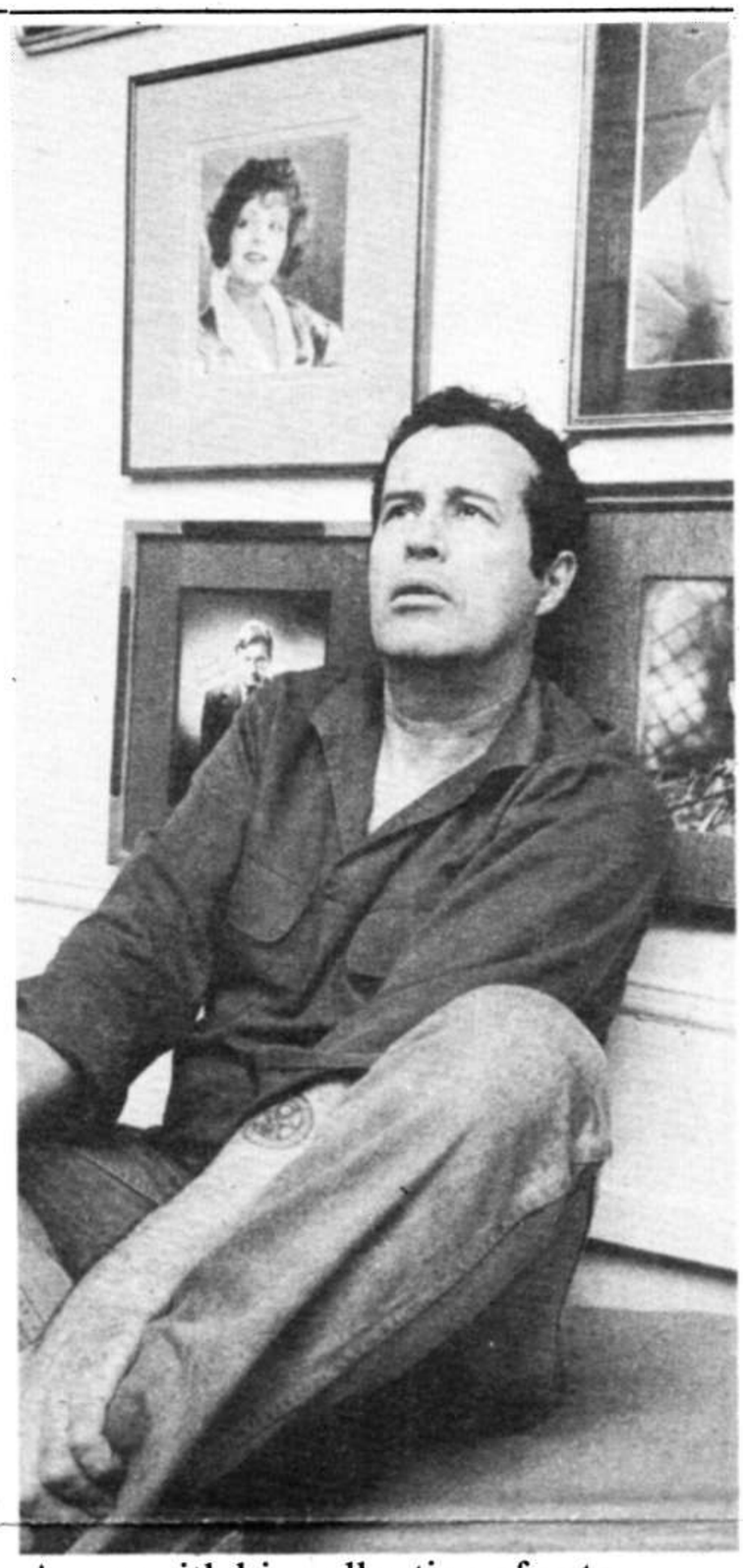
At 17, with his parents out of town for a weekend, Anger made the underground classic, *Fireworks*, a sexual rite of passage in which a young boy (played by Anger himself) fantasizes a brutal beating at the hands of a group of handsome sailers. As with *Scorpio Rising* (1962), which depicts a wild spree of a motorcycle gang, critics have found it necessary to see *Fireworks* as a denunciation of the violence or sexuality involved (politicos, for example, have insisted that the two works are either "pro-fascist" or "anti-fascist," depending on their own particular political—and perhaps sexual—persuasion).

"I have an ironic approach—detached and ironic," Anger says in reply. "That's the way I look at everything. That's my view of the world. I'm an artist. In that film (*Scorpio*), I'm simply viewing a certain phenomenon that was happening at that particular time. I don't see the films as a homosexual statement, I see them as a human statement. *Fireworks* was a pioneer film out of its time in that it treated homosexuality very frankly."

But the films neither proselytize nor condemn. "No, that would be completely distorting it, to put it into one framework or the other. It's a personal statement about my own feelings about violence and certain kind of masculinity. Also a treatment of a kind of myth in America which relates to the American sailor. That's a part of history now, but the sailor then was a kind of sex symbol on one level, and on another level there was a great deal of ambivalence and hostility, latency and fear in the image—all those things going on. It was a dangerous situation."

Anger's other films over the years have included *Puce Moment* (1948), *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953), *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954 and 1966), *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1964), and *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1968), the last made from some out-takes from *Lucifer Rising* and scored by Mick Jagger.

Jagger did the score in a single night "before he had time to get bored with the project," Anger says. He feels that neither Jagger nor any of the other Stones (with the possible exception of the late Brian Jones, who was interested in Pan worship) are seriously involved in magical interests, despite the occult trappings of some of their recording ventures (*Their Satanic Majesties Request*, *Goat's Head Soup*, "Sympathy for the Devil"): "The Stones are entertainers and I think that's about it. Lately they've gotten into a very contrived performance thing—the amazing thing to me is that *they* can stand to do it over and over again. It's contrived excitement. Jagger and I had a few conversations about Lucifer that I think gave him the idea for 'Sympathy for the Devil,' but we've never had any prolonged and deep conversation. I haven't seen much of him at all since his marriage. He seems more involved with the jet set than he is with street rebels."



Anger with his collection of autographed photos, including Clara Bow and Claude Rains

Along the line, Anger spent time in England, France and Italy, and once worked for Albert Kinsey, the sex researcher ("He's the only man I would ever have voted for for President of the United States. I really admired him. He would have made a wonderful president"). He's a compulsive movegoer, a collector of nostalgic memorabilia (particularly of Hollywood). He would like to do a color art book of his rare autographed-photo collection, and he's planning a sequel to *Hollywood Babylon* entitled *Washington Babylon*.

The woes that have beset Anger with *Lucifer* have included the death of the child actor first picked to play Lucifer, the desertion of the project by the second Lucifer, Bobby Beausoleil (who later joined up with Charles Manson and is now in prison)—who not only left but took the completed portion of the film with him (the film was about half done) and buried it somewhere in the Mojave Desert. Anger has still not recovered it.

Casting Lucifer remained a constant problem, with Mick Jagger's brother Chris stepping into the role for a short time then withdrawing. When the filming was finally completed, the London producer with whom Anger had a "nominal contract" for the film (a legal technicality in England) went bankrupt—and the original negative of the film was confiscated by the court for almost two years.

"There's been a whole series of things happening," says Anger. "It's been like a continuing drama. But I don't take any particular stance on it. I'm on top of it rather than it being on top of me, and I knew that sooner or later it would all work out."

What has attracted Anger to such diverse areas as gossip/scandal, the mystiques of rock and Hollywood,

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and ritual magic? "The link is what's called technically *glamour*. Not like in 'glamour girl.' *Glamour* really means enchantment. It's a Gaelic word."

IV.

Kenneth Anger is a loner. He has always epitomized the "independent filmmaker": self-taught, self-supported, stubbornly insistent on portraying a vision that is his alone, he describes his early career as "always overreaching myself—borrowing things, getting people to help me. I was very ambitious, but I was always running out of money, having to make compromises like shortening the film."

"As a child," Anger continues, "I actually wanted to have a studio of my own. Where I could make sets and do all kinds of special effects and things like that. As an adult at least I'm my own boss. I've got that much of it. I don't have a front office to contend with." There was a time, Anger acknowledges, when if he had gone to the right offices in Hollywood he could have gone the commercial route. He's glad he didn't, even though it means taking time out to write a scandal book in order to get enough money to complete his life-work. "I like the luxury of being able to work on something so long. Time to let the project evolve."

In the world of magic, Anger is alone as well, as are almost all magicians. Despite the popular conception of love potions and sex hexes, sincere magicians almost never use their powers to hold an emotional partner. And the magician's ability to maintain a personal relationship is further complicated by an oversensitiveness to the psychic vibrations of the proposed partner. Most magicians and priests practice alone, with some assistants and friends, true—but relationships with equals are almost always strained.

Anger: "Whenever I have tried to bring in a magical partner, or involve myself with other people, my fingers have been badly burned and I've learned to avoid it. It's a kind of nostaligia, like, gee, wouldn't it be great to have a magical partner, to have it work on that level. Which is more than just a lover. It becomes something special—two people sharing a vision. But it's extremely difficult. The history of magic is littered with the cadavers of that kind of relationship. Because, unfortunately there are titanic battles of ego and will that come into play and it usually ends up on the rocks."

One such relationship, brief in duration, did lead to the inspiration of *Lucifer*, however: "I met a boy who said his name was Joe Lucifer, in San Francisco, on the run from a mental institution. I knew him very briefly, but knowing him set off the idea. He had a compelling quality that some people have when they're just on the edge of madness. Just how crazy he was I don't know. I saw him as an elemental demon. He filled all the descriptions. Whether he was possessed by a demon or whether he was himself the embodiment of one, that's the question. He was a strange mixture, part Syrian, part Irish—green eyes, red hair, rather short and stocky. He was very striking looking in an unkept kind of way. He also looked rather wild, and I suppose any objective person would say he looked rather dangerous. But actually he was quite sweet.

"The way I met him was one of those extraordinary coincidences of things happening, of timing, which when you work with magic you just accept. It was like a novel or something—too exaggerated, too coincidental. But I've had things like that happen a great deal. But I never had a chance to film him, because he disappeared. And I don't think he would actually have been agreeable to the idea. He was what you call a natural, rather than someone you can work with."

Or live with.

V.

Kenneth Anger is a *Mary Hartman* fan, albeit a rather critical one. But about as strong a *Mary Hartman* fan as someone who's a quiet loner-rebel-magician but gets upset when the faucet explodes can be. He approaches Mary the way he approaches his art, his Hollywood Babylon subject matter, his homosexual motorcyclists, his demon brothers—everything, in fact, except his Magick Itself—with a sense of fascination mixed with ironic distance. Likewise he himself can only be approached so close:

"It's like trying to film a magic ritual—a ritual is just the outer manifestation. If you're not feeling what's going on within the person—I mean, there's an invisible element. It's almost as frustrating and self-defeating as trying to film two people making love. You can see the outer mechanics of it, but you're missing the whole show. I think there are elements of the experience which can be communicated, though. Magic is something which diffuses all experience. It isn't something which can be switched on and off, like, this is an occult experience and this is ordinary life or ordinary reality—because once you accept the viewpoint that there is magic in the universe, it's everywhere even in the most banal things. Even though most of the texture of life is anti-poetic, nevertheless even in that gross garb magic is present. It's there in ugliness and pain as much as in beauty and pleasure."

Somehow I think Mary Hartman would be very pleased. And there's a kind of key in Anger's relationship to her that explains a great deal about both their worlds. ●

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